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ABSTRACT

Relationships between spelling and reading have been found such that poor readers are often poor spellers, but good readers may or may not be poor spellers. Part of the reason for the seeming contradition may be that spelling requires precise knowledge of individual letter combinations whereas often as much meaning in reading can be obtained from context as from the makeup of individual words. Spelling is made more difficult by the inconsistencies of English pronunciation, by the discrepancies in numbers of letters and combinations of letters used to represent English sounds. Teachers and parents can be aware of several common types of spelling errors so that these can be corrected early in the learning of words. Good spelling habits are invaluable in learning to read. This brochure is one of a series commissioned by the National Reading Center to help inform all citizens about reading issues and to promote functional literacy. References are included. (MS)

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READING AND spelling

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READING AND SPELLING

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SPELLING AND READING: HOW ARE THEY RELATED?

By Leo Fay
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Children in this country's colonial period were told:

> "And if you can't read,
> pray endeavor to spell
> for frequently by spelling,
> you will learn to read well."

For over a century children were taught to read using Webster's Bluebacked Speller, (which incidentally, proclaimed that it had taught "millions to read and not one to sin.") Today, the inter-relationship among the communication skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking are again being recognized as important in curriculum planning and teaching.

Studies of the relationship between spelling and reading and the history of their instruction consistently show that the two are significantly, but not *totally,* related. Poor readers are also poor spellers, the experts say, but the reverse is most often not the case. Good readers tend to be good spellers, but frequently superior readers may be mediocre or even poor spellers.

The purpose of this brochure is to explain the seeming contradiction of this, as well as the necessary difference in the methods of learning to *read* well as opposed to learning to *spell* well. Spelling and reading should operate synergistically, and each complements the other.

THE DISCREPANCY

The relationship between reading and spelling concerns the child's ability to work with word forms and to recognize the words that he encounters. From this follows the ability to grasp the author's meaning. In one respect, spelling is the reverse of reading. When he is spelling, the child must think of the letters that represent the sounds of the word he wishes to spell. He puts the sounds into a code or symbol form represented by the alphabet. This process is sometimes called "encoding". When reading, the process is reversed. The child encounters the total word and must decode it to unlock its meaning. He has to associate the printed symbol with the sound of the word.

Some efficient readers pay little attention to the individual letters of a word and may be poor spellers. A good reader makes maximum use of the context or the sense of what he is reading, and is able to identify words with a minimum of attention to their detail. The general shape of the word, its root or other major component parts make it unnecessary for him to examine carefully the word's *spelling* structure.

HANDICAP FACTOR

The erratic nature of English spelling is another factor which explains the good reader, poor speller phenomenon. The value of our alphabetic writing system is often lost because of the inconsistencies of pronunciation. Early in his life the child encounters goes-does; to-go. Spelling, too, is illogical: bear-bare: their-there; and many other like-unlike sets of words add to his confusion in both reading and spelling. Some words he must simply memorize—others have rules and sub-rules.

There are approximately 43 sounds in the English language but only 26 letters to represent them. In addition, the same sound may be represented in several different ways. Consequently, learning to spell English is more difficult than learning to spell most other modern languages, just as learning to read English is more difficult than learning to read other languages which have more *consistent* systems.

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The magnitude of the problem becomes apparent with comparisons to other languages. Italian and Turkish both use 27 letters to represent 27 basic sounds. German uses 38 symbols for 36 sounds. Russian uses 36 symbols for 34 sounds; and English uses 379 symbols (letters or combinations of letters) to represent 43 sounds. This complexity can add between one and two years to the time an average child needs to learn to read English in comparison with the time needed for an average child learning to read Spanish, for example.

Ben Franklin, George Bernard Shaw and Theodore Roosevelt were among those who have proposed simplified or reformed spelling to improve both reading and spelling skills. Severai current reading systems—i/t/a, UNIFON, the World English Alphabet and the New Single Sound Alphabet—attempt to overcome this problem by providing the beginning reader with a more consistent spelling system.

In recent years, bills to reform spelling have been introduced in almost every session of Congress, but have never been taken seriously. Change would be complicated and perhaps only partially successful because of the dialect differences that exist in all parts of the English speaking world.

SOME TECHNIQUES

Poor readers usually make the same kind of errors in spelling that they make in recognizing words. This is why some form of spelling test or analysis of spelling errors is generally included when diagnosing a student's ability to analyze words while reading. The kinds of mistakes he makes in spelling will be very much like the mispronunciation errors he makes when reading orally. Grade scores, however, are not useful in helping a child to become a more effective speller or reader. Finding his mistakes and helping him to overcome them is more useful. Teachers should determine *how* the student approaches spelling and the recognition of words. Is he

systematic? Is his system an effective one, and does he use it efficiently?

The techniques in reading and spelling should *not* conflict with each other. For example, the teacher who is trying to help children to see words in larger units when reading, should not develop contradictory habits by teaching children to spell on a letter-by-letter basis.

The simplest way to review what progress a child is making in both reading and spelling is to examine samples of his reading and writing. For reading, record the way he reads—degree of fluency, expression, rate--and list errors in pronunciation. For spelling, record actual misspellings.

The relationship between reading and spelling will often be revealed by common kinds of mistakes. Reversals (saw for was; stop for spot), omissions, additions, substitutions, and ignorance of the alphabet, are common mistakes of poor spellers and are typical of poor readers as well.

Poor spellers often try to spell nonphonetic words phonetically (Wensday for Wednesday; or enuf for enough), distort spelling because mispronunciation (Febuary for February) or omit the middles or, more often, the ends of words.

In most schools, beginning activities with words in reading and in spelling are much alike. Whole words, not components, are the child's intitial contact in beginning reading lessons. In spelling, too, the child begins to write before he knows the sound elements and their letter representations. At first he copies the teacher's model or words that he sees elsewhere. He tries to make a correct copy, rather than to remember all of the letters. In developing beginning competence in reading and writing, the teacher guides children to understanding of the alphabetic principle that letters represent sounds in a systematic manner. This principle is basic to learning when encountering new words in reading, and when correctly spelling words produced independently, rather than copying.

Later, syllabic structure and meaning—the root, prefix and suffix system—are taught as a basis for developing maturity in reading and spelling. Finally, to become a secure and independent reader and speller, one must use the dictionary well and frequently. Early instruction in its use is indispensable.

MASTERING THE SYSTEM

It is clear that success in reading depends on mastering the system of English spelling. The system is a code: the reader must decode; the speller must encode. Learning to read well and to spell efficiently are complementary activities—success or difficulty in both go hand in hand—but the relationship is far from absolute. A good speller may have trouble with reading which demands a high level of comprehension, and a good reader, who excels at interpreting words in context, may be a miserable speller. Simplification of English spelling would ease a lot of the problems of both, but until that occurs the advice given to colonial children is probably as good as any!

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